FORT CUSTER MILITARY RESERVATION,
P-67 RADAR STATION
Approximately 1/4 mile north of Dickman Road
east of Clark Road, and west of Bedford Cemetery
Battle Creek
Calhoun County
Michigan

HAER NO. MI-87-A

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
Northeast Region
Philadelphia Support Office
U.S. Custom House
200 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, P.A. 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

FORT CUSTER MILITARY RESERVATION, P-67 RADAR STATION

HAER NO. MI-87-A

Location:	Approximately ¼ mile north of Dickman Road, east of Clark Road, and west of the Bedford Cemetery. Battle Creek Calhoun County Michigan UTM: NW corner 16/641440/4689160; NE corner 16/641760/4689180; SE corner 16/641760/4688920; SW corner 16/641460/4688900, USGS Quadrangle: Augusta, Michigan 7.5' series
Date of Construction:	1950-1951
Engineer:	United States Army Corps of Engineers with Contractors
Architect:	United States Army Corps of Engineers with Contractors
Present Owner:	City of Battle Creek, administered by Battle Creek Unlimited
Present Use:	Vacant
Significance:	The Fort Custer P-67 Radar Station is significant because it illustrates the link between World War II technology and the implementation of computer operated SAGE technology.
Project Information:	This mitigative document was undertaken in 1995 in accordance with Stipulation I(A)(2) of the Memorandum of Agreement between the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Department of the Army, Corps of Engineers, Detroit District. The buildings of the Fort Custer Military Reservation P-67 Radar Station are scheduled to be demolished. Dr. John D. Richards, Principle Investigator; Patricia B. Richards, Ann Kowenstrot and Robert J. Watson, Project Archivists with Great Lakes Archaeological Research Center, Inc.; Eric Oxendorf, Project Photographer.

THE 781ST AIRCRAFT CONTROL AND WARNING STATION

The Veterans Administration granted approximately 30 acres of land to the Air Force under an indefinite term permit in October of 1950, upon which the 781st Aircraft Control and Warning (AC&W) Station was constructed.[1, 2] Construction of the Radar Station was completed and became operational on February 22, 1951, with the arrival of one officer and 10 enlisted men from the 30th Air Division.[3] The squadron's mission, equipment, strength, command headquarters, and its relationship to other organizations were highly classified for over a year.[4, 5]

The 781st was part of the nations first line of defense. It was a part of many such squadrons spread across 26 states on the nation's northern border, and its east and west coast lines.[6] The Radar Station operated with the help of the Ground Observers Corps, whose duty it was to scan the skies and identify unknown aircraft to fill in the gaps in the radar network.[7]

The AC&W radar station consisted of a new set of permanent buildings fenced apart from the rest of the fort.[8] The structures built were an operations building, a central heating plant, an emergency power building, a primary radar tower, a transmitter building, a receiver building, a service stock building (later to become the supply and administration building), a gate house, and a security building. Over the years, additions were made to the existing buildings, and new structures were built and removed.

The operations building was set up similar to an amphitheater, with a 12 foot high circular plastic map at the ground floor level.[9] Rising to the back were three "stages", each containing among other equipment, radar scopes, the operations officer, and a communications officer.[10] All aircraft were detected by the sweep of the radar antenna. The exact location of the aircraft would be marked on the large plastic map, along with speed, time, and other pertinent data.[11] If, after checking flight plans and the assigned air filter center, it remained unidentified, the operations officer had the authority to order up fully armed fighters to make an identification of the aircraft.[12] If the unidentified aircraft proved to be enemy and too powerful for the fighters to handle, the AAA units at Fort Custer would be put into action.[13] Most of the officers in the radar detection stations were veteran pilots.[14]

In 1955, after Fort Custer was in its second year of inactivity from war duty, the radar station was still operating the huge radar antenna scans over the skies of southern Michigan.[15]

The Semi-Automatic Ground Environment (SAGE) system brought with it the gradual dissolution of the AC&W radar station. The SAGE system was one of two in the state, the other being at K.I. Sawyer AFB in the Upper Peninsula, where information on enemy planes could be evaluated.[16] Radar information, formerly taking upwards of 15 minutes, could be transmitted almost instantaneously from various radars along the radar net.[17] The SAGE system retained control of several structures located in the now former AC&W station. The transmitter and receiving buildings and the Telco building, the latter having been built for the sole use of the SAGE system, remained in control of the Air Force.

The remaining structures and property of the AC&W radar station was reported excess to the General Services Administration (GSA) by the Department of Defense on 19 November 1964.[18] The property presently belongs to the City of Battle Creek and is administered by Battle Creek Unlimited.

CONSTRUCTION CHRONOLOGY ACCORDING TO PLAN DRAWINGS AND HISTORY OF 781ST AC&W SQUADRON

The original structures were built in the late part of 1950 and the early part of 1951. These structures consist of: operations building, central heating plant, emergency power building, primary radar tower AN/FPS-3 (later to become AN/FPS-20, prime search radar), transmitter building, service stock (later to become the supply and administration building), receiver building, gate house, and security building.[19]

Between 1955 and 1957, a second radar tower was built, directly north of the primary radar tower.[20] This tower was an AN/CPS-4 height finder tower, and the AN/FPS-3 primary radar tower became an AN/FPS-20 prime search radar tower.[21, 22] Between July 1957 and January of 1958, a new radar tower was built and operational; it replaced the AN/CPS-4 height finder tower.[23] This tower was located directly north of the emergency power building and was an AN/FPS-4 height finder tower. By December 1958, two additional towers were built and operational; the AN/FPS-6A No. 1 (sometimes referred only to as the AN/FPS-6) and AN/FPS-6A No. 2.[24, 25] These were improvements of the AN/FPS-4.[26] The AN/FPS-4 height finder tower was dismantled and removed by January 1959.[27] Between 1 April and 30 June, 1959, the AN/FPS-20 prime search tower was being recabled and the AN/FPS-6A No. 2 tower was used as the prime search tower.[28] After 1 July 1959, the three towers remained operational in their specific duties. An additional radar tower was built after 1959, and its purpose is presently unknown.

FORT CUSTER P-67 RADAR STATION STRUCTURES

Emergency Power Building

The emergency power building was designed to house a number of diesel powered generators that provided power to the radar station in the event that normal power sources were not functioning. The emergency power building is a one-story concrete block building, approximately 31 x 49 feet, with a flat roof, constructed on poured concrete footings. It consisted of one central room that housed three generators. The entrance to the emergency power building was located on the north elevation, which also contained a window and a louvered vent. An additional door as well as a window and a louvered vent were also located on the south elevation. The east elevation contained three evenly spaced windows. A series of four evenly spaced openings were located on the west elevation. The generator units were positioned near these openings which provided ventilation for the generators. Construction plans for the emergency power building dated 1 July, 1957 show an addition to the south elevation of the structure. This addition was to extend the building to the south by 14 feet and provide space for an additional generator and radiator. The addition to the emergency power building dated 1957-1958 shows extensions to the west elevation (18 feet, 2 inches), the east elevation (11 feet, 3 inches), and the south elevation (18 feet, 11 inches). This later plan was intended to provide space for one additional generator, one radiator, switchgear, and an office.[29, 30] Neither of these additions were constucted.

Operations Building

The operations building is the largest of the existing structures at the Fort Custer radar facility. As viewed from the exterior, the operations building consists of two sections. The main section of the structure, which appears on a design plan as a latter addition to the existing operations building, measures approximately 53 by 85 feet, and is constructed of concrete blocks. This addition was added to the existing building sometime in 1957 or 1958. The main section of the operations building has walls that are considerably taller than the other section of the structure. The walls

appear to be approximately sixteen feet high, but since no detailed elevation design plans for the operations building were available, this is only an estimate. The smaller section of the structure is located at the north end of the building. It is approximately 55 x 16 feet, and is constructed from concrete blocks. The walls of this section of the building are shorter than the main section, and are approximately 12 feet high. The operations building contains three entrances. Two entrances are located on the northwest elevation of the smaller section of the building. The other entrance to the operations building is located on the southeast elevation of the main section of the building. Three air vents are located on southeast elevation as well. A concrete block tower, measuring 5 x 5 feet, and approximately twenty feet high, is located at the northwest corner of the operations building. A louvered vent is located at the top of the tower, on its southwest side. The exact function of the tower is not known at this time.

Central Heating Plant

The central heating plant was designed to house necessary equipment that provided the radar station with heat. Design plans indicate that there was an area north of the heating plant used for coal storage The emergency power building is a one-story concrete block building, approximately 31 x 49 feet, with a flat roof, constructed on poured concrete footings. It consisted of one central room that housed three generators. The entrance to the emergency power building was located on the north elevation, which also contained a window and a louvered vent. An additional door as well as a window and a louvered vent were also located on the south elevation. The east elevation contained three evenly spaced windows. A series of four evenly spaced openings were located on the west elevation. The generator units were positioned near these openings which provided ventilation during their operation. A coal storage "building or structure" was located directly north of the central heating plant and shows up on site plans dated ca. 1958-1959. [31, 32]

Administration and Supply Building

The administration and supply building is a one story building, approximately 24 x 62 feet, constructed from concrete block. The building has a very low pitched hipped roof. The north elevation of the administration and supply building contains a centrally located garage-style overhead door. On either side of the garage door are sets of windows consisting of three windows in a tight group. The west elevation contains a centrally located personnel door, flanked on both sides by windows. The south elevation contains at least six windows along its entire length. The east elevation contains neither windows nor doors. No detailed construction designs for the administration and supply building were available, which prevents more particular descriptions of interior rooms and their possible functions at the radar station. Construction plans dated July 1957 to December 1958, an additional administration building appears.[33] It appears to have been located directly east of the present supply and administration building. All that remains are structure footings and a sidewalk.

Transmitter Building

The transmitter building is a one story "L" shaped building constructed from concrete blocks. Each of the walls on the inside of the "L" contain two louvered vents. The west elevation contains six of these large vents. A personnel door is located at the eastern end of the south elevation. The south elevation also contains four louvered vents. The east elevation, at the end of the "L", contains a single window. The north elevation, at the other end of the "L", lacks doors or windows. No detailed construction designs for the administration and supply building were available, which prevents more particular descriptions of interior rooms and their possible functions at the radar station. Two storage sheds (coal storage block) were constructed, each adjacent to the transmitter and receiver buildings in a period shortly after the original construction.[34]

TELCO Building

After May of 1956, the Telephone Company (Telco) building appears on construction plans.[35, 36] Apparently this structure was built to be used with the SAGE system, and was not a critical structure for the AC&W facility operations.[37] The telephone communications (TELCO) building is a single story concrete block building that housed telephone and communications equipment. A personnel entrance was centrally located on the north elevation and was flanked by a widow. All other elevations of the TELCO building were completely devoid of windows or doors. No detailed construction designs for the TELCO building were available,precluding more particular descriptions of interior rooms and their possible functions at the radar station.

Radar Facilities

The Fort Custer radar station contained four radar tower units. Two of these towers were height finder radars, one was a prime search radar, while the function of the fourth radar is, at present, unknown.

Height Finding Radar Towers

The height finding radar towers were located to the north and northwest of the operations building. The radar platforms were mounted on dodecagonal towers comprised of poured concrete pillars joined by horizontal concrete braces. The horizontal braces are situated so as to give the radar bases the appearance of being made up three distinct levels. Each height finding radar tower consisted of an outer dodecagon and a smaller, inner dodecagon both constructed similarly. Support for the radar dishes does not appear to have been the main reason behind this type of massive construction. Rather, the towers were so constructed so they could withstand a relatively high degree of damage before losing structural integrity. When operational, the height finding radar units had two story twelve sided corrugated steel buildings mounted to the cement foundation. This structure, in turn, supported the actual radar dish. The radar dish was covered with a protective dome. The only remaining features of the height finding radars at the Fort Custer radar station are the poured concrete bases.

Primary Search Radar Tower

The primary search radar was located between the power building and the TELCO building. The primary search radar was constructed similarly to the height finder radars. The primary search radar platform was mounted on dodecagonal towers comprised of poured concrete pillars joined by horizontal concrete braces. The horizontal braces were positioned so as to give the radar support the appearance of being made up of two levels. Like the height finding radar towers, the primary search radar base consisted of an outer dodecagon and a smaller, inner dodecagon both constructed similarly. The primary search radar had an additional poured concrete pillar centered inside the dodecagonal constructions. This added pillar apparently provided additional support for the radar units. The cement foundation of the primary search radar supported a two story twelve sided corrugated steel building. This structure, in turn, supported the actual radar dish. The radar dish was covered with a protective dome. Both the cement base and the steel structure of the primary search radar remain at the Fort Custer P-67 radar station.

Unknown Function Radar Tower

A fourth radar tower was located to the northeast of the height finding radars. The function of this radar is not known at present. This radar tower was constructed very differently from the construction of the height finding and search radars. The support base of this radar tower was not

constructed of concrete as were the other radar towers. Rather, the base of this radar tower consisted of a square steel scaffolding which was anchored into the ground with poured concrete footings. The scaffolding supported a large, square corrugated steel building. On the top of this building was a round platform that supported the actual radar unit.

SIGNIFICANCE

The Fort Custer P-67 Radar Station represents the evolution of radar detection systems in the newly developing Air Defense System of the USAF following World War II. The changes charted in the nature of the facilities correspond to the implementation of the USAF temporary Lashup System for early warning and the shift to the Permanent System of early warning. The P-67 Radar Station at Fort Custer fits the pattern characteristic of early Air Force detection systems. Property already in the possession of the government was utilized for construction of these radar stations. The P-67 Radar Station was built on property owned by the Army. Further, obsolete World War II equipment was initially installed to be quickly replaced by technologically superior equipment. The placement and evolution of radar towers at the P-67 Radar Station illustrates pattern. This station served from 1950 until 1959 when it was replaced by a SAGE facility. The P-67 Radar Station at Fort Custer Military Reservation is significant because it illustrates the link between primitive World War II radar technology and the implementation of computer operated SAGE technology. The P-67 Radar Station is a remaining example of the technological adjustment which was being made in post World War II United States to a new series of defense challenges. Although the buildings are gutted, and the equipment has been removed, the physical configuration of the radar towers and buildings serve to illustrate this adjustment.

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3 *As You Were: FORT CUSTER.* 1985.
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6 Ibid.
7 Alfred Goldberg,*History of the United States Air Force,*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, p. 131.
8 Battle Creek Enquirer and News "Scan Skies for Red Stars, Custer Radar Is Part of Defense Line". May 18, 1952.
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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 The Battle Creek Enquirer & News "Ft. Custer Facilities Put to Many Uses", Jan. 2 1955.
16 Detroit News "Our New Split Second Air Defense, Improved Radar Device Soon To Guard State Against Attack", Sept. 1, 1959.
17 Ibid.
18 Alfred Goldberg,*History of the United States Air Force,*.p. 131.
19 USAF Station P-67,Fort Custer, Michigan, Plot Plan (to accompany FY 1956 project planning report), 22 July 1954.
20 P-67, Fort Custer, Master Plan, 3 May 1956.
21 Modification of Electrical Distribution, General Site Plan, Fort Custer Air Force Station, no date.
22 Electrical Plot Plan and Duct Details FD Radar Facillities-FPS-27, Custer Air Force Station, Battle Creek, Michigan, no date.
23 Modification of Electrical Distribution, General Site Plan, Fort Custer Air Force Station, no date.
24 Ibid.
25 Historical Record of the 781st Aircraft Control and Warning Squadron, Battle Creek, Michigan, 1 January 1958 through 30 September 1959.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Sections and Elevations,Emergency Power Building, Fort Custer Air Force Station, Battle Creek, Michigan, no date.
30 Floor Plans and Details,Emergency Power Building, Fort Custer Air Force Station, Battle Creek, Michigan, no date.
31 Modification of Electrical Distribution, General Site Plan, Fort Custer Air Force Station, no date.
32 Electrical Plot Plan and Duct Details FD Radar Facillities-FPS-27, Custer Air Force Station, Battle Creek, Michigan, no date.
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34 USAF Station P-67,Fort Custer, Michigan, Plot Plan (to accompany FY 1956 project planning report), 22 July 1954.
35 P-67, Fort Custer, Master Plan, 3 May 1956.
36 Modification of Electrical Distribution, General Site Plan, Fort Custer Air Force Station, no date.
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No Title (floor plan of annex to existing operations building), no date

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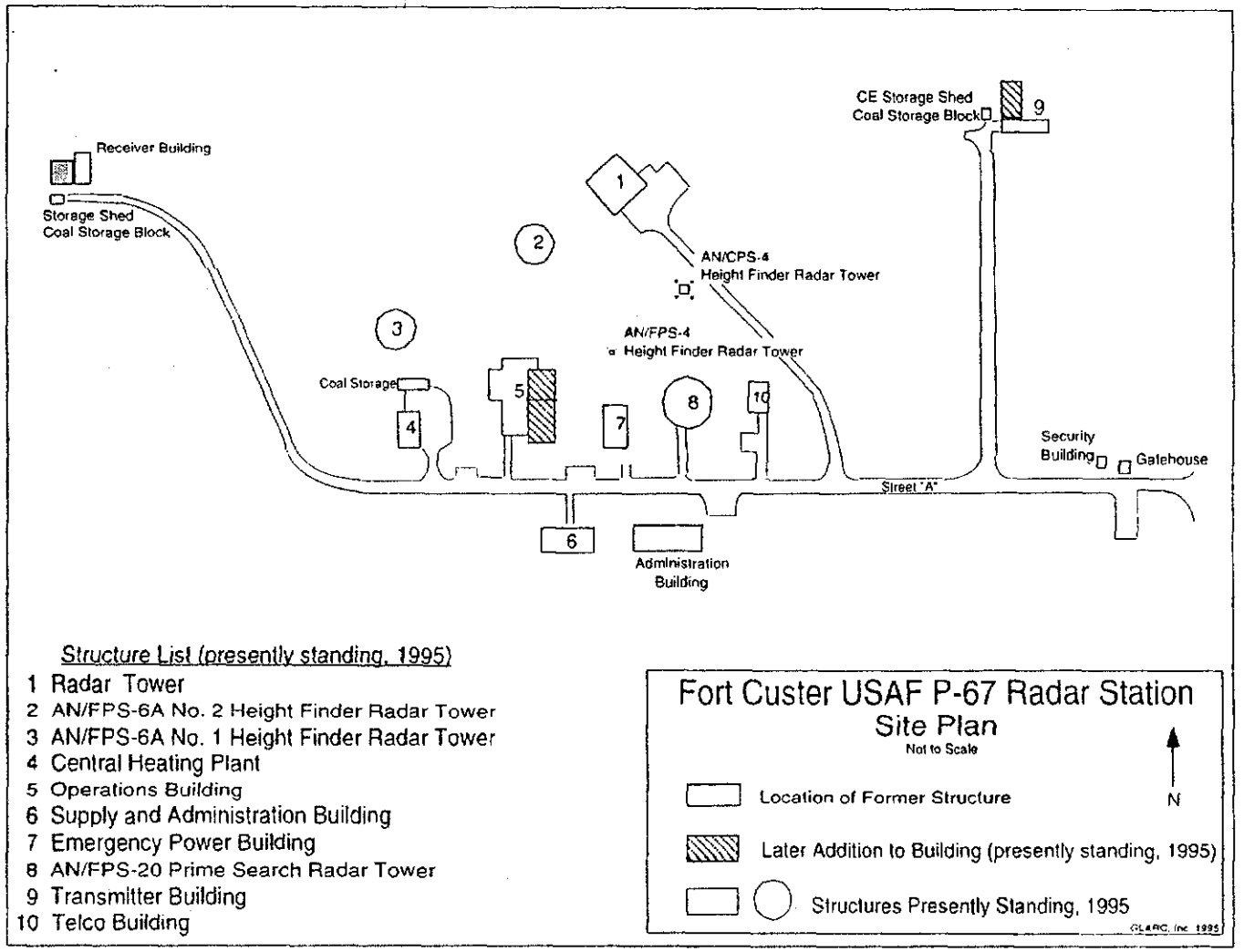

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